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The South in the Olden Time

By J. L. M. CURRY



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J. L. M. CURRY

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THE SOUTH IN THE OLDEN TIME.

BY J. L. M. CURRY.

Probably no people nor institutions have been more misunderstood than those of the Southern States. One need not go far to find the cause. Southern books and newspapers are little read. Their circulation is mainly local and provincial. The war between the States so unexpectedly protracted, the terrible casualties connected therewith, involving so many families, political antagonisms, and the discolored and exaggerated statements in fiction and more serious literature and in partisan speeches, have prevented the calm investigation and the sound judgment given to other questions which have not so much sentimentality. One speech in the Senate precipitated a war with Spain. One novel was largely instrumental in exciting the Northern mind to a determination of "no Union with slaveholders."

UNANIMOUS SATISFACTION OVER ABOLITION.

The South retained the "peculiar institution" of African slavery, fastened on her against her protests, while the North, where it existed in every State at the time of the Declaration of Independence, 1776, liberated herself from it more than half a century ago. The "institution" for many reasons became so incorporated in the social, political and industrial life of the South that its severance, by slow and natural causes, was almost an impossibility. Property interests, pride of opinion, jealousy of alien interference, resistance to aspersions and aggressions, consolidated the South and induced action which under other conditions would have been the very reverse. That is made plain by the unanimity which now exists of

satisfaction at abolition, of unwillingness at any cost to have the negroes reënslaved, and of the depth of conviction that slave labor, instead of being a benefit, was the prolific parent of a thousand evils.

SOUTHERN CIVILIZATION.

The marked civilization which distinguished the South was not altogether due to slavery, but unquestionably it largely contributed to the creation and maintenance of certain social peculiarities which are rapidly disappearing. In proportion to the whole white population the slave-holders were few in number, and of those who owned slaves a very large majority owned only a few, from one to five. When slaves were held in numbers sufficiently large to give character to the plantation, some results were easily discovered. The estates were large and this necessitated overseers or subordinate managers, the concentration of labor on a few crops, and prevented that desirable subdivision of land which improves agriculture and gives to a country an independent yeomanry. Population was sparse, roads were neglected, free schools could not be established, and the estates became a species of baronies, where the lords of the manor exercised an inferior government quite apart from the general civil jurisdiction.

SLAVEHOLDERS AND STATESMANSHIP.

As a rule, the owners of many slaves and of large plantations were men of intelligence, of masterful qualities and often of much culture. Governing a community of dependents in such a way as to temper control with moderation and justice, to exact obedience and steady labor without provoking ill-feeling, rebellion, escape or anarchy, to insist upon order and authority and have, at the same time, cheerful and productive work and great affection, developed a habit of government at home which was

ripened into statesmanship on larger fields. The isolation of plantation life and unshared responsibility stimulated individuality, self-reliance, acting on one's own judgment. In most matters of domestic concern there was no public opinion to which they could be referred, no tribunal for arbitration, and the master was, under the general laws of the Commonwealth, the sole and supreme legislative and executive authority. This independence, self-government, and the presence of a subject class made the slaveholder the vigilant, sometimes hasty protector of the honor of himself and family, the stern advocate of limitations upon the powers of the civil government and the valiant defender of the liberties of his race. Hence, Burke's well-known tribute to the unconquerable love of freedom and manly insistence upon their rights, of the Southern colonies in the earliest days of conflict with the mother country.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD STORE A CIVIC CENTER.

That slaveholders were the leaders in politics and held many influential positions in the State and the Federal governments is not strange. Where people were segregated and families were sometimes miles apart, the court house, the militia musters, the elections, the public speakings, the rural churches, were the places and the occasions for the discussion of agricultural needs, of prices of products, of taxes, of conduct of representatives and public officers, of neighborhood affairs. The shire-town was generally a small village and offered no inducements for assemblages of the people, except when twice a year the Circuit Courts were held. In nearly every country neighborhood was a store where everything of a miscellaneous character was kept, and at the same place was the post office. Every day persons, not kept at home by necessary work, were at these stores, and everything pertaining to human life was brought under consideration.

What more natural and proper than that those who had wealth, were men of affairs, were familiar with markets, read newspapers and traveled, should be consulted and deferred to. When, as often happened, there were present those who had been in the Legislature or in Congress or had visited the seaport cities to buy merchandise or sell produce, they would be called on for information or opinions, and they were listened to with respect and attention. My earliest recollection is associated with spontaneous, somewhat unpremeditated, gatherings of farmers at stores and the conversational discussion of questions far beyond my boyish comprehension.

MAJORITY OF FARMERS WITHOUT SLAVES.

It is worthy of mention that nearly every person looked forward to the time when family work or cares would be lightened by the ownership of a slave. Still, I have known hundreds of lawyers, doctors, merchants, farmers, preachers, mechanics who did not in their own right possess slaves. The majority of farmers had no slaves, but sometimes hired them by the year. These farmers worked their own fields side by side with the negroes and their children. The widely prevalent notion that the cultivation of cotton and tobacco at the South is, or ever was, dependent upon negro labor is an error, unsupported by fact. Far more than half of the present ten million bales of cotton have been produced by white labor. The stigma of "poor whites," so often used in derision and contempt, is unwarranted and grossly unjust. Many non-slaveholders and persons of small means have, in peace and in war, signalized their lives by all the virtues which enoble humanity and advance civilization.

ILLITERACY NOT IGNORANCE THEN.

Illiteracy was unfortunately not confined to the negroes, as sparseness of population prevented State systems of free schools. It would be an erroneous inference

that these illiterate people were wholly uninformed. The assemblages to which reference has been made were valuable schools and educatory in a high degree. In antebellum days political discussions prevailed universally. Candidates for governorship, Congress, for Legislature, often for other offices, engaged in joint discussion before the people. Appointments were made for public speaking, time was divided equally among contestants or between parties, and for hours there was earnest attention to debates upon the most important questions. Let me illustrate. In 1847 and 1853, when a candidate for the Alabama Legislature, education, finances, taxation, State aid to railways, were discussed. In 1855, when the Know-Nothing or American party, was seeking power in the State and Federal governments, the tenets and purposes of that party were presented by the chosen champions on each side. In 1856, as a candidate for Presidential elector, and in 1857 and 1859, when seeking a seat in Congress, making forty or fifty speeches in the district, the issues were internal improvements by the general Government, distribution of the proceeds of public lands, veto power, tariff, expenditures, power of Congress over the Territories, "Squatter Sovereignty," and in 1860 and 1861, right and expediency of secession and relation of the States to the Federal Union. In those days, while parties

NO BOSSISM, NO CONTRIBUTIONS, NO CORRUPTION.

were distinct and party feeling was strong, party machinery hardly had an existence; "bossism" was unknown, voting by sections was unheard of. As a general rule, each man voted as an independent citizen and bribery or corruption in elections, when it occurred, made the place and persons a by-word and a scorn. My contests for the Legislature and for seats in the Federal and Confederate Congress cost me practically nothing. The whole ex-

pense was covered by a few hotel bills, announcement of candidacy in the newspapers and the printing of tickets.

NOT A DOLLAR FOR CAMPAIGN EXPENSES.

In the eight times I sought the suffrage of the electors of county and district and State, I did not pay a dollar for campaign expenses; no such contribution was asked or expected, and I never knew of a dollar being paid for a vote or a nomination.

NO SOCIAL DIVISIONS AMONG WHITES.

There was in the ante-bellum days no perceptible social division between slaveholders and non-slaveholders as classes. No sharp lines of separation were drawn between them. In marriage, in visiting, in office holding, in professional or other employment, no question was raised as to the ownership of slaves or interest in this species of property. I recall several members of Congress who held no slaves. Merit, respectability, virtue, was the open sesame to dinners, entertainments, marital relations. Color drew a broad and ineffaceable line of demarcation. The least taint of inferior racial blood operated *semper ubique* as an exclusion. Piety, church membership, was not the social standard, but integrity and proper treatment of slaves were. I have known wealthy men, according to the estimate of wealth in those days, indicted and convicted for the cruel treatment of their negroes. The counts of the indictment were insufficient food and clothing, over work and harsh and unusual punishment. The marriage relationship was sacred. A person divorced for other cause than the awful sin of adultery was tabooed. Separation of husband and wife was tantamount to social proscription. The family was the unit and relationship of the worthy to a remote degree was recognized, and the bond of fellowship embraced all except those who offended the laws of decency and honesty.

PURE ANGLO-SAXON BLOOD.

The white population of the Southern States was Anglo-Saxon. Homogeneity was not much disturbed by alien immigration. It often excites remark and surprise to find that Southerners know their kin in different States and have such minute personal knowledge of many families.

HOSPITALITY A CHARACTERISTIC.

Home was sacred and the dearest place on earth, and Christmas was the time for reunion, from grandparents to grandchildren. It was not uncommon to see from twenty-five to sixty relatives seated at the bounteous board. In the country, with a sparse population, clubs and theatres did not exist to seduce young men from parental supervision. Between parents and children the intercourse ordinarily was unconstrained and affectionate. Schoolmates often spent the night with their fellows, and this neighborly courtesy was freely reciprocated. Co-education in the country schools and academies was universal, and no harm but much benefit came from this companionship. Hospitality abounded and was a characteristic trait. There was rarely a single night for years when there was not under the roofs of my neighbors a welcome guest. The entertainment was without formality, and the guests were treated, and acted, as members of the family. With the slaveholders, or with such of them as had a number of dependents, the cost and trouble of entertaining were almost *nil*. The table for the family bountifully supplied needed no additions. There was little economy, perhaps much waste, in the food provided, for what was unconsumed by the "white folks," to use the common phrase of the black people, was used in the kitchen, or in "the quarter," as the village where the negroes had their houses was called. Gardens supplied vegetables; the orchards, fruits. Corn, ripe or green,

peas, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, watermelons, etc., were in the fields. Besides cooks and maids and butlers, etc., the children, too young for outdoor work, or selected for skill and intelligence, were on hand to do superfluous or

HOUSE PARTIES OF SEVENTY.

extra work. The entertainment in the country included horses. I have been at houses where seventy guests, with nearly as many horses, were cared for during three or four days. The one-crop system, pernicious in the light of political economy, left but few products for market. When cotton, tobacco, sugar, rice, and sometimes wheat and corn were sold, nothing else had a marketable value. To sell milk or butter or vegetables, was an unknown commercial transaction. Watermelons, apples, peaches, cherries, turnips were free. At least, persons traveling on the road, did not regard it as wrong, or forbidden, or any violation of rights of property, to enter orchards or fields and take what was wanted for immediate personal use. This prodigal living has often been condemned, and is described here to give a true picture of the South.

NO ISMS, NO SKEPTICISM.

The country churches have been mentioned as furnishing opportunities for talking over questions of common concern. Conflicts as to the Sundays of worship were avoided as far as possible, and accessible places, within six or eight miles, had a general attendance. Ecclesiastical or denominational differences, while fully recognized, did not interfere with social or political affiliations. Neighborliness, kinship, personal friendships, did not allow ecclesiastical estrangements. The religion was of the accepted orthodox character. The new isms were unknown or promptly rejected. Infidelity or skepticism, used in a broad, undefined sense, was regarded with horror and not unfrequently made synonymous with untrustworthiness. Sickness in a family called forth practical

sympathy and helpfulness. Funerals or burials had the presence of the whole community as a mark of respect or to honor those highly esteemed.

RECIPROCITY IN KINDNESS.

Agricultural life evoked much helpful coöperation in cases of exigency or special need, and these services, cheerfully rendered, were always returned in full tale. Not to reciprocate put one as much without the pale as if he had committed a dishonorable act.

SNAKE-HEAD RAILROADS.

That useful *vade mecum*, the *World's Almanac*, gives the total track of railways in the United States at 245,238 miles, and the passengers carried as 514,982,288; 904,633 miles of telegraph wire, with 61,398,157 messages, and 772,989 miles of telephone wire. When we consider how our country is now covered with a net work of railways and telegraph and telephone wires, it is hard to realize how recent was their origin and how rapid has been their progress. In my boyhood days, railways were few and short. In Alabama, in 1843, there were only two, one around Muscle Shoals, and the other between Montgomery and Franklin, and it was put down on string pieces with flat-iron bars, which, torn up by wheels, occasionally projected into the cars, impaling passengers on what were termed "snake-heads." In 1843, *en route* to Harvard, I traveled from Augusta to Charleston by rail, built nearly all the way on trestle work, and by steamer

THE STAGEDRIVER A CHANCE FOR THE PEN AND PENCIL.
from Charleston to Wilmington. Much travel in those days was on horseback, or in hacks, or picturesque stage coaches, which signalled their arrival in towns and villages, and notified the taverns of number of passengers by long tin horns or by making more ambitious music on bugles. The stagedrivers knew everybody on the road,

carried packages and messages, and were sometimes the confidants of country lasses and bashful beaux. The Bonifaces are often drawn in character sketches, but the stagedriver of the olden time, a typical class, has escaped portraiture by pen or pencil. Romances of the road are unused material.

SHINPLASTERS.

In these days of plentiful gold and silver, inquiries are sometimes made of me about shinplasters. During the financial stress, beginning with 1837, in the absence of a sound circulating medium of "specie" or bank notes, banks, corporations, towns, stores and individuals issued small notes for the fractional part of a dollar, to be redeemed in current bills when the sum of five dollars was presented. These notes, usually printed on thin and worthless paper, were circulated far and wide, and when mutilated, as soon occurred from handling, or sent so far away as never to return, the issue of the notes enured to the benefit of the voluntary banker. A number of these notes are now before me, and were issued in South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, one, on the Union Bank, Pulaski, Tennessee, sent out in 1837, is decorated by a pretentious stage coach, full of passengers, drawn by four stylish horses.

CARICATURES ON SLAVERY.

On no single phase of life or civilization has the South been so much misunderstood and misrepresented as on the subject of slavery, in its varied and manifold connections. The caricatures of the relation of master and servant in popular fiction, the honor of canonization conferred on John Brown, whose acts can find excuse or palliation solely on the plea of insanity, or fanaticism run mad; the descriptions of superficial observers like Dickens, Hall, Featherstonhaugh, have made impressions which, however unjust, are almost impossible of eradication.

That there were cruel taskmasters, that slavery had indefensible features and consequences, no reasonable person can deny, any more than he can deny cruelty in husbands, neglect in fathers and oppression in employers since the world began. The relation of master and servant was not one, generally, of hardship or cruelty. After the exaction of labor, not paid for in money wages, the interest of owners dictated such treatment as would not impair the productiveness or value of labor, nor depreciate the property. Apart from humanity, selfishness made it desirable and necessary, in food, clothing, shelter, service, to consult the physical well-being of the slave. A standard of morals and of intelligence, as far as compatible with the condition of servitude, also enhanced his pecuniary and industrial value. Bearing in mind the fact, the biblical fact, the legal fact, the traditional fact, that property in man existed and was to be maintained, the relation of master and servant was one, in the main, of good treatment, kindness and affection.

A RADICAL REVOLUTION IN SOUTHERN VIEWS.

Of course, it is difficult for persons outside the South, or born since 1861, to form even a partial conception of slavery as it existed before secession. As well may the people of Cuba or the Philippine Islands, fifty years hence, be expected to understand the Cuba and Philippines of 1898. Since 1860, Southern sentiment and law have undergone a radical revolution. Nine hundred and ninety out of every one thousand white people in the South rejoice that the negro is unalterably free, and about the same ratio regards slavery as a wrong, or a gross economical blunder. As Mr. Lincoln's policy and earnest effort at deportation were not accomplished, a less ratio concedes that citizenship was an unavoidable consequence of emancipation. Now comes "the rub" which Northern

NEGRO SUFFRAGE AN INDESCRIBABLE BLUNDER.

opinion fails to grasp. Suffrage was not a legal nor a desirable sequence of emancipation or citizenship, and has been a curse to the South, to the whole Nation, and so far as the negroes are concerned, in their bewildering freedom, an indescribable blunder. Denounced as the South may be for its persistent opposition to negro suffrage in the aggregate, it may as well be understood that the conviction will increase in intensity unless deportation or diffusion, or some other effective agency, reduce the evils of the congestion of the black population. The Southern people approve the limitation of the elective franchise as ordained by Massachusetts, Connecticut, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. The more intelligent and conservative regard an educational qualification as an indispensable condition precedent to voting, and coincide with the most worthy and remarkable leader of his race, Mr. Booker T. Washington, in wishing the same restriction made applicable to both races and en-

IMPOVERISHED WHITES AND NEGRO EDUCATION.

forced with equal justice and impartiality. Hard as has been the burden, which the general Government, wickedly, cruelly, suicidally, has refused to aid the South in bearing, thus abdicating the logical and patriotic duty inseparably connected with emancipation and citizenship and suffrage, every Southern State has established a public school system, sustained by taxation, conferring equal school privileges upon the two races. The Bureau of Education says the South has expended since the war over \$100,000,000 for the education of the negro. It should not be forgotten by the censorious that fully \$90,000,000 of this money came out of the pockets of the impoverished white people.

THE VIRULENCE OF RACE PREJUDICE.

The friction between races at the South finds painful parallel in New York, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. It is but fair to remember that the negroes, in the Northern towns and cities, where mob violence occurred, were insignificant in numbers. Lawlessness and revenge were far less excusable, in the light of relative provocation, than in the South where the negroes outnumbered the incensed white people. The virulence of race prejudice overwhelmed the forces of law and order in communities where the inhabitants were, in part, of New England origin, and where an appeal to competent civil authority should have had prompt and protective response. Some one has said that there is no alchemy to get golden conduct out of leaden instincts. Infuriated mobs violate recklessly all laws, human and divine. Social, political and industrial upheaval, and the ill-advised and revengeful reconstruction legislation have failed to produce legitimate results because of the former good feeling between master and servant and the patient and good conduct which, in the aggregate, has marked the two peoples. The inexcusable lynchings and the atrocious crimes which caused them have been surprisingly few, and are not justly chargeable against the great mass of

A TREMENDOUS PUSH UPWARD.

either race. The exemption from strikes at the South, from the lawlessness of organized and assertive labor, the beneficial effects of good climate, fertile soil, rich mineral resources, the spur from impoverishment to greater industry and economy, the better prices for some agricultural products, have lately given the South a tremendous push upward. Every patriot should labor for a better understanding of his fellow citizens, for the obliteration of the last vestige of sectional prejudice and bitterness, for the enlightenment of opinion, for the consummation of equal and exact justice to both races, for the uplifting of Ameri-

can citizenship, for the strengthening and ennobling of all influences which will perpetuate free, representative institutions, add to our prosperity and happiness, and make more lustrous and beneficent our example to all peoples, struggling for free government, based on intelligence, integrity and capacity.

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